

Chinese Corner

Titular rectitude - the art of name calling

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For foreigners from a culture of informality like Australia, where you can allegedly hail most people as either 'Bruce' or 'Sheila', Chinese naming conventions may seem mind boggling. Accordingly, China Daily provided an excellent short guide to the maze in August 2014, on which we base this Chinese Corner.

At work in particular, there is greater formality and power distance in relationships. Thus, you should refer to a person's family name and job title when addressing them, in deference to their social standing. For example: 李处长 Lǐ chùzhǎng (Director Li); 包经理 Bāo jīnglǐ (Manager Bao); 吴主席 Wú zhǔxí (Chairman Wu); or 梁老师 Liáng lǎoshī (Teacher Liang). However, this does not follow for the lower ranking job roles, so you wouldn't dream of referring to people as 赵保姆 Zhào bǎomǔ (Housemaid Zhao) or 孙服务员 Sūn fúwùyuán (Waiter Sun), except perhaps in a skit for comic effect. Instead, the gentler approaches of 赵阿姨 Zhào āyí (āyí, or 'auntie' being the general address for a housemaid) or 小孙 Xiǎo Sūn (小xiǎo as a diminutive meaning 'young') feel more caring and intimate. Even senior work colleagues frequently call new staff using 小 + 姓 (Xiǎo plus family name), too.

Leadership positions in China generally consist of a chief and several deputies. The chief (正) is the decision maker, sometimes with many deputy (副) positions as assistants under him or her. On formal occasions, deputies should be addressed as "副" to differentiate them from the chief. However, on informal occasions, especially when only the deputy is present, 副 should be omitted, as it is impolite to remind them of their deputy status. So 李副处长 Lǐ fù chùzhǎng (Deputy Director Li) becomes 李处长 Lǐ chùzhǎng (Director Li) or 李处 Lǐ chù when the chief is not around.

If you are invited to KTV to let your hair down with your boss after work, you may be allowed to shorten his or her title. For example, 王董事长 Wáng dǒngshìzhǎng (Chairman of the board Wang) becomes 王董 Wáng dǒng and 包总经理 Bāo zǒng jīnglǐ (General manager Bao) can become 包总 Bāo zǒng, 李处长 Lǐ chùzhǎng (Director Li) can be shortened to 李处 Lǐ chù, although not all titles can be abbreviated. This mercifully makes pronunciation simpler once the inevitable 白酒 bái jiǔ (Chinese vodka) begins to take effect. Highest ranking people should be greeted first, of course!

China Daily further reports that globalized business and cultural norms are increasingly leading the Chinese to call each other 先生 xiānsheng (Mr) and 女士 nǚshì (Ms), while many young people like to be known by their English names at work. Finally, a word of warning not to refer to young ladies using 小姐 xiǎojiě (Miss); this has negative connotations, and could result in immediate and excruciating pain if the lady thus addressed is skilled in the martial arts.

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2015 is the Chinese year of the sheep (or goat)

The Chinese character is 羊, pronounced yáng. Traditionally, this 8th zodiac sign was associated with the goat, as sheep were not common in ancient China. However, to cater to customers who prefer the fluffy sheep to the spindly goat, many businesses promote the former for the festive season.